Erica Hayes
Sins of the Son
A Tale of Bluebeard

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Published by Erica Hayes, 2017.

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SINS OF THE SON: A TALE OF BLUEBEARD

First edition. October 30, 2017.

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ISBN: 978-1386609360

Written by Erica Hayes.

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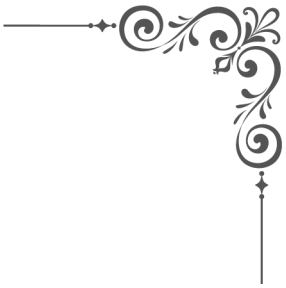

Sins of the Son

Poor girl.

My bride-to-be sits modestly on the chaise, keeping her gaze lowered. Her clinging ball gown is of white silk. Her hair trails in wisps. She's pretty, this waif, I'll give her that. Too delicate for the likes of me. She's half my age, and though I possess title and wealth in plenty, anyone will tell you I am no girl's handsome prince.

We are, as I have contrived, alone.

"Madam—" I clear my throat. The fire crackles. On the mantel, candles burn amid garlands made of holly and pine. "You will have heard, I suppose, certain rumours about me."

She averts her face, cheeks glowing. Is that what poets call a 'maidenly blush'? "My lord, I would never credit scurrilous gossip—"

"The rumours are true." I grip my empty glass tightly. She has a right to know. To recoil, spit in my face, call me *witch* and *sinner*.

"Oh." Her voice is small.

"Most of them," I add, though I know not why. Pride. Shame. Some crippled need to justify myself.

"I see."

The wind hurls rain against the window with a whistling curse. Out in the ballroom, beyond the half-closed door, the orchestra strikes up a prancing minuet. It suits her, this gilded mansion. My estate lies in the country, a hundred miles and more from this glittering royal city, and my castle is old and dwells in the past. I imagine this doll of a girl feasting in my windswept hall, with its stone floor covered in straw, the dogs and men snoring in piles before the great hearth.

I imagine her in my life, and my hands start to shake.

I take a breath. "My lady, it is not too late to dissolve our arrangement. I could speak to your father..."

"That won't be necessary." Still, she will not look at me. Perhaps she is afraid. They say I look like a devil, with my father's blue-black hair and deep-set eyes. If you'd known him, you'd admit they have a point.

I try again to explain. "My estate is large. My household supports many tenants who depend on me. There must be heirs, do you understand?"

Still nothing.

"Were it otherwise, I fear I would not be..." I begin to despair. She is innocent. Must I say the words out loud?

But at last she looks up, and gives a small shrug. "You must have heirs, and I must be a wife. Our desires are immaterial. This is the way of the world."

I swallow. The way of the world, indeed. Already, I have misjudged her. "Be certain, madam. There will be no going back."

Last chance. My rough manners, my cursed countenance, the raw truth of what I am. Only say the word.

She fingers her wine glass. "You are a man of honour, my lord," says she at last. "Even on our brief acquaintance, I know it. I believe you will treat me with every kindness. "

And just like that, she snares me, in a promise I did not yet speak.

I take a knee at her feet, and kiss her little hand. So tiny, this silk-clad flower, her eyes barely level with mine. So fragile. "I swear it," I whisper, and she smiles at me.

Every kindness, short of love.

And in this moment, I dare to believe we might not be unhappy.

AS SOON AS I LAID EYES on him, I was in hell.

My estate covers hundreds of square miles, meaning endless days on horseback to manage my affairs. This particular summer—the year before I courted my gossamer bride—had been poor, the rain incessant, and crops lay rotting in the fields. As if impending starvation weren't penance enough, dead crops meant rats, and rats meant sickness, and many of my tenant farmers were already reduced to despair. In those months, I made it my practice to ride from village to village, hearing grievances and settling disputes and lending assistance where I might.

I'd slowed my weary horse to a walk as I came upon the village at the forest's edge. It had rained all day, and my hair dripped down my back, my

gear bespattered with mud. My retainers had gone on ahead to arrange some business in town, and aside from Blaze and my trio of hounds I was alone.

I was tired and hungry, but if I stopped a moment, some fearful villager in far more desperate need than I would insist I eat his food, drink his spirits, bless his children, and where I come from you do not refuse hospitality, no matter how grudgingly given. So I loosened the reins and let Blaze amble where he would, for a black cloud of desolation had descended upon me, and in such moods I shunned company.

I flatter myself that I am not a cruel lord. I mete out justice, it is true, as my father did before me. I punish those who need correction. Still, I don't dishonour my tenants' daughters or rape their wives or hang their children for fishing in my streams. I keep rents reasonable, and frustrate the imperial tax collectors where I can, and meet the unfair church tithes from my own coffers when the tenants cannot pay.

But my heart hung stubbornly heavy; that morning I'd prayed over a mass grave, fourteen children dead of plague, their end only hastened by lack of decent food.

The village priest was an old man, and he'd eyed my inherited appearance and made the sign of the cross. Idiot. My father had known what I was from an early age, and nothing would have pleased him more than to disown me as another man's bastard. But the sins of the father are visited on the son, so saith the Lord, and for once His justice was good, because anyone with eyes could see who had sired me.

It made me want to laugh. To grab this priest by his scrawny liar's throat, share with him exactly how my father had looked on his death bed, after he'd lain there on the crumpled quilt for three days turning green. Bruises on a corpse don't fade, priest. They just rot faster.

But instead, we'd prayed, the old coward and I, as mothers wailed and the gravedigger tossed quicklime over the tiny bodies in the hole, and my anger at least was genuine. For my memory stung, the image freshly skinned of some other dead boys long ago, bleeding into the snow at my feet, and my praying hands clenched into fists. *I am not a witch, Lord. But I wish I were, for so help me, I would undo this thing you have done.*

After that, I'd ordered a farmer whose five pitifully thin sheep were sick with murrain to slaughter and burn them.

I stood and watched, to make sure the man didn't disobey my orders. I wouldn't blame him for it. His family starving, and all those pounds of meat

to waste. The weeping wretch fumbled the knife, and the beasts squealed and fought their coming end. Blood and piss everywhere. The wood was damp, and the pyre wouldn't kindle, so eventually we buried the carcasses in the wet earth. I gave him coins, and his wife knelt in the mud and kissed my hand, but I knew my charity for the joke it was. What would she buy? Famine has no respect for silver.

The sheep in my folds were not sick. Plague had not visited my castle, at least not yet. My table would be sparse this winter, but it wouldn't be bare. Why should these people suffer when I, of all sinners the most unrepentant, am spared?

No, I was not a cruel lord. But life? Life was cruel. And so was God.

I nudged Blaze towards a thicket and dismounted, needing to relieve myself. The dogs—Ivar, Mikhail, Niklas—caught some elusive scent and ran in circles. Blaze shook his wet mane in disgust. Nearby, a party of hunters tended to their horses, their saddles slung over with game. No deer. Only rabbits, and a few scrawny fowl that would roast away to bone and sinew.

Unlike the villagers, who sported a single threadbare layer if they were lucky, these hunters were comfortably dressed in tabards and leather boots. Town men, sons of burghers and shopkeepers, their wealth paltry but sufficient to give them airs. One young fellow swore good-naturedly as he tried to wring rainwater from his cloak, and inevitably he arrested my eye.

A stocky lad, but agile, his legs muscular from riding. Roughly good-looking, with coarse dark curls, and stubble covering his chin. He shucked off his wet gloves, flexing brutally thick hands. "Christ, it's wet as a mermaid's twat."

"As if you'd fucking know," another said.

"Bite me, maggot." The handsome boy bent over and shook himself like a dog. Water sprayed, splashing his insulter, who swore and shoved him.

He darted away, laughing, and it was then that he noticed me, standing in the rain, Blaze's reins still in my hand.

He knew who I was, of course. I'm the witch prince. I'm hard to mistake.

He didn't react at first. If he wondered why I was staring at him, he didn't show it. He just sauntered over to his horse, and started fiddling with his gear, head bowed to hide his expression. Disgust, I had no doubt; hatred, fear. I'd seen them all, and with a sigh I began to turn away.

But then, he glanced back. A swift, secret glance, just for me.

He was smiling.

My heart skipped a beat. A flash of bloodstained snow, corpses freshly dead. And I leapt astride Blaze and rode away.

THE NEXT DAY, AND FOR many days afterwards, I whistled for my dogs and rode once more to those sodden forests, but the hunting party didn't return. My days passed in distraction. At night, I lay awake, or paced my chamber in a sweat, fearful of sleep lest I dream of him and betray myself. I even prayed, not for guidance but for deliverance. *Lord, I know you hate me. But don't torture me while I'm still on earth. Just send me to hell and be done.*

And then, one day in town, as I squinted in the sun on the cathedral steps, my prayers were answered.

Across the square, that devil-dark hair, his fine clothes, his casual swagger. A heart-stopping flash of charcoal eyes, and he was gone.

My chest tightened. Did he see me or not? Was he avoiding me? Did he even remember? I didn't care. I had to face him. I wanted to hurt him. Break his fingers. Smash my fist into his nose, spoil his handsome face, make him leave me be.

I shouldered through the crowd. Tracked him through twisting streets that stank with mud and rats, with unknowable wrath in my heart.

Then, a sunless dead end, my quarry trapped. Behind him, I made out the dim annex to a stable. Low sloping roof, the smell of straw and horse sweat. He spread his hands, as if to say, *now you have me, witch prince. Do your worst.*

That cocky smile of his made me burn. He'd known I followed him, of course. He knew what I wanted better than I.

"I could kill you." My voice was hoarse. I'd done it before. Of all the epithets they hurl at me, *murderer* at least is fair.

"But you won't." A step closer. Bold as Satan, this boy.

I grabbed him. Shoved him backwards into a post, forearm across his throat. His mouth tasted of wine and blood, and his hands were sure and quick and as hungry as I'd dreamed.

HAD I HOPED IN THIS way to be cured of my obsession? I was not. I only craved him harder, and with that craving came fear. Fate has never been my friend. Was it a trap, to offer me what I desired and then snatch it away?

I would like to say I agonised, torn over what to do; that I faced temptation and resisted, even for a little while. But the truth is that I surrendered without a fight.

The next day, I returned to the same place, and he was there, and I put him on his knees and spent my newfound love into his willing mouth—I say *love*, because love is already what it was—and afterwards he told me his name.

This, then, was my new life, and it was wondrous in my eyes. My gaiety, an unaccustomed thing, startled the servants. I laughed for no reason, my world filled with sunlight. I looked for excuses to ride into town and find him. I brought him gifts, things he could not keep, jewels he dared not wear, and he laughed and kissed me and called me a fool, but there was nothing funny about the passion we shared.

In my castle's draughty chapel, where my father's unadorned grave gathered dust, I boasted of my sin. *I am lustful, Lord. I covet. I take your name in vain, old man, and I do not repent. Punish me, if you can.*

It became a game to us, the myriad ways we could defile and corrupt. I had him in the town church at midnight, our naked sweat staining the altar, while the empty eyes of that crucified liar looked on. I undressed him in the graveyard where his grandmother was buried, made him curse and call on heaven in the moonlight.

I learned he was the son of a lawyer and town councillor, so I turned up at the man's house and paid meaningless compliments to his daughter over cups of wine, while over her shoulder my lover glowered and mouthed curses. Later, he kissed me in the dark on their doorstep, breathing fast and sucking hard on my lip until there was blood. "If you fuck my sister," he whispered, his hands upon me exacting sweet revenge, "I'll kill you."

And so we went on. He was young, comely, desirable, of which I was none; that he wanted me was a miracle. His jealousy thrilled me, and the danger of discovery only thrilled me more. But eventually I grew frustrated. This would not do. I was used to owning things. I wanted him to be mine, and so long as we skulked and concealed, he still belonged to *them*.

After some weeks, I contrived to get him to my castle.

Along with his companions, naturally. There was still good hunting in my forests, if you knew where to look, and in any case no town man would dare refuse my invitation. So one bright day, a band of us rode out and shot deer and rabbits, and at sunset we dragged the carcasses in a trail of blood back to the keep.

I watched him as we rode in, as he looked about him and took in my castle, my bustling courtyard, my stables, all the things and people I owned. The ease with which I commanded my domain, the weight of history that empowered my every gesture and breath.

That night, while snow swirled outside, we all feasted in my firelit hall, gorging ourselves on roasted flesh and wine and the crude jokes of young men. All the while, I struggled to keep my eyes off him; his coat unhooked and shirt unlaced, his throat gleaming with sweat, his lips glistening wet as he drank. He barely glanced at me, this cunning co-conspirator of mine, but when he did, his dark stare seared my breath away—afire, not only with desire, but with awe.

Late in the night, when the rest were insensible, snoring by the hearth in the stink of wine and vomit, he stole up to my bedchamber. He was urgent, driven by fresh hunger, teeth and tongue and hands and cock, begging me to take him before he spent himself. I obliged, and his every shudder and gasp made me exult. Finally, he understood. I was the prince: I owned the world. I could have anything I wanted, and I wanted *him*.

After that, there was no going back. I'd let him breach my fortress, and for good or ill, he was trapped. I trusted him; I showed him everything. My castle, my treasures, the private places I kept most closely guarded. Even the chapel, that musty sepulchre of secrets where I'd learned to curse a feeble God.

He ran a rough fingertip along the tomb's marble slab. Beside it, steps led down into the dark, to the narrow door with its rusted lock. "And there?"

"Crypt," I said shortly. "Just old graves."

"Sounds like fun." A greedy glint of eye. "Who died? Your last secret lover?"

I shut him up with a kiss. If he wished to defile a grave, this one right here would serve admirably.

Still, some lies had to be told, some cover story. He is a second son, and must make his own way, but he couldn't linger on my estate without an excuse, so I found one. I discovered he was good with numbers and

brooked no nonsense from connivers and sycophants, and when I made him my household steward, no one dared call me out. At least not at first, and not in public.

Of course, the servants knew. The fact that I disgusted God was not new to them, especially not to the old folk who still remembered that row of bloodied corpses in the snow, and the things my father had screamed at me that day. But it had yet been my practice to use a thing once and then let it go. I had never *kept* one before, and as summer faded and early morning frosts crept in, the whispers of my sin spread and grew louder.

Sodomite. Devil. Corrupter of children. The priests would not give me communion, and I stopped going. Farmers whom I had saved from starvation more than once made the evil eye as I passed. Villagers nailed yew branches above their doors, and burned my likeness on bonfires.

But I cared not. I saw him every day, and every night he was in my bed, and all the while, in that cold stone chapel, my father mouldered away in his grave, powerless to do anything about any of it. It was the first time in my life I'd wanted for nothing.

For I was in love, and lovers—as I was soon to discover—are sometimes curiously blind.

ONE WINTER'S MORNING, as we breakfasted on ale and honey-soaked crusts, I sneezed.

"Bless you," he murmured absently.

I sneezed again, and it turned into a cough. Dizzy heat swept me. I gripped the table with hands suddenly weak and damp, and the woman tending the fire crossed herself and hurriedly backed away.

For two weeks, I was mortally ill. Sweat drenched my bed—the bed where my father, too, had died, the sniggering black shape of a demon crouched on the bedpost—and a sickly delirium crawled out from hell to claim me.

Death is everywhere. A kitten, its breast sliced apart, its little neck askew. A woman in chains, her beauty withered, wrists raw to the bone. *Help me,* she croaks, *mercy, let it end*, but I am only a boy, I am small and afraid and I dare not.

Now I'm hiding under a bed in the stink of blood while atop it my mother writhes, crying *cut it out!* And I run and run and it's snowing and I

stumble, I fall into a pile of corpses with waxy skin and staring eyes. Those young men, throats cut and bleeding into the ice. They stretch out rotting fingers to grab me. *You killed us, prince. We loved you, and you slaughtered us like beasts.* No, I protest, that's not what happened, and then their faces melt and they become the man I love, and I scream while they roast on a pyre with the carcasses of five dead sheep and that starving farmer's wife. And all the while my father shouts at me, spit flecking, his fists splashed with blood, though somehow he too is already dead, green and blotched with corruption. *See what you have done! You are my only son!*

On my sickbed, burning death seized me by the throat, and I laughed, for bruises on a corpse don't fade. *Take your revenge, Lord. I am at your mercy. Kill me, if you dare.*

Later, I learned that while I sweated and raved, my lover had taken charge. Had marshalled our dwindling supplies, kept the panicked household in line, silenced greedy speculation on what might happen if I died. Had watched over me, careless of his own health, though my first command once I reclaimed my senses was to send him out.

I recovered. I regained my strength, amid the bleak reality of empty places at tables and graves hacked too shallow in the frozen earth. The plague had stolen into my castle like a sneakthief, and twenty good god-fearing people had died. But I—the witch prince, surely the most flagrant sinner of all—I was still alive.

As winter dragged on, I brooded, and the black fog of melancholy I thought I'd shaken forever came creeping at the corners of my mind.

What if I *had* died?

Gift my heart as I might, I could not will my inheritance to this boy. The other nobles would not stand for it. They'd murder him and fight each other for my land over my still-warm corpse, if it came to that. And then what of my estate? My tenant farmers, depending on me for law and charity? My servants, who whispered in the dark about witches and devils and murdered boys, but when daylight came, shouldered their burden and served me anyway because it was that or starve?

I'll let it all rot, I'd hissed into my father's face as he died. At the time, I'd meant it more than life. *I want you to know that. Everything you've built will be dust.*

But I'd won. I had what I wanted, and Father was dead. Was my spite worth so much suffering?

For long weeks, I raged against the answer. Until on one spring night, as my lover lay atop me, chin on my shoulder, tangling my stiff blue-black locks in his fingers, I finally spoke the truth.

"I need to get married."

He gave me his hot charcoal stare. Didn't speak. Just slid down my body, his stubble rough and his mouth hot and wet, and reminded me that even should I take a dozen wives, I would still belong to him.

MY WEDDING IS IN AUGUST. The city heat is oppressive. The gilded church reeks of stale incense and sweat, and the flowers wilt, much as my new father-in-law wilts under my stare as he gives the bride away. Such a villain as would trade his daughter to a man like me is not worth my spit, though of course I play the game and have made it worth his while.

At the palace, I have found myself hip-deep in councils and audiences, my ears alive to murmurings in curtained salons. The hallways of power rumble with the distant thunder of war. Her father is the tsar's man, and I have soldiers and horses. This is how futures are secured.

My bride floats like a fairy in her lace veil. Weightless, a spun sugar girl. Her tiny hand trembles as it clutches mine. When she kisses me, her lips are dry and warm. We take communion, and the body of Christ is dry and flaky like ash.

A week and a day later, we arrive at my castle.

I jump down from my saddle, and hand my wife from her cart. Her travelling clothes are creased, but she has endured the tedious journey without complaint. We have had some small conversation. She is witty, and likes to read, and once owned a dog named Patch. This is all I know.

Casually, I glance around the courtyard, this ants' nest of servants and couriers and horse boys. I have been gone for two months. *Where is he?* The need for the question frightens me.

Hastily, I present my princess to her new household—she has brought her own maid, but for the rest my cringing servants must suffice—suggest she might like a bath and a change of clothes, and excuse myself.

In my solar, he's pacing the flagstones, waiting for me. On my desk, the account books he's been keeping lie scattered, and a broken inkpot has disgorged its contents on the wall.

He strides up to me. Shoves me against the desk, his sulky mouth hard. Starts unlacing me. "God, I hate you."

In a second, I'm so hard it hurts. I grab for him, to claim him back.

He slaps my hand away. Doesn't stop what he's doing. "She's pretty. Do you like her?" He watches my face. "Do you want her?"

Christ, this is hardly the time for such questions. "It doesn't matter wh __"

He works me roughly, squeezing, his nails grazing. "Do you love her? Say it."

I'm hurtling towards the edge. I'm falling. And then he lets go. I stumble and curse and grip myself, but it's too late and I need him and I can't.

"When you have her," he says as he walks away, and his voice sounds oddly strained, "you'll think of me."

It echoes, and fades, like a warning. *Think of me.*

That night, at the banquet I hold in her honour, he isn't there.

The hall is fragrant with summer warmth and fresh pine branches. My wife sits quietly at my side. Mechanically, she eats her food. Slice, chew, swallow. Below us, my men feast, drink, kiss their women, raise a raucous din. Kitchen boys scurry to and fro. Dogs wrestle and whine on the straw-strewn stones. Not the society she is used to. Is she looking from man to man, weighing up their attractions? Asking herself, *can he be the one? Or he? Is he a servant? A stable boy? A soldier?*

Perhaps she thinks it's all of them.

I am peevish, snappy with the pages, drinking more than is good for me and waving away dish after dish. I have no appetite. Where is he? It isn't like him to be so petty. He knows this is how it must be. I am his prince, by hell, and I will teach him what happens when he crosses me...

But first, this thing must be done.

Once my wife has retired, I wait a decent interval, and go to her room.

I halt outside the door, and take a deep breath. My fists clench. Ordinarily, I can accomplish without trouble what I now must do. It's not that I don't like it. But I'm shaking. I've barely eaten, and my head swims with drink. I'm bruised, aching and exhausted, and I love another.

Yet this thing must be done.

Softly, I knock, and enter.

She sits on the bed in the firelight, waiting, looking pretty and fragile in her lace nightgown. A dutiful wife.

How much does she know about what happens now?

Carefully, I sit beside her. Her rosewater scent is sweet. "Are you comfortable here, princess? Have you everything you need?"

She nods. Gives a nervous smile.

I take her hand. It is warm. I kiss it. "You shall have all you desire, my lady. I will make sure of it."

At last, she looks up. "You're very kind—oh!" I kiss her open lips. She tastes of mint. She is trembling. I am twice her size. I imagine how I look to her, rough and strange. I imagine the stories she has heard about me, about what men do to girls. I think of my father's women, playthings he used and wrung out. Of my mother, murdered by his indifference and a child that would not come. And I pity her, this wife of mine.

"Don't be afraid." I taste her again, and stroke her hair, and gently touch her breasts, and before long she opens for me like a flower.

Soon, she lies before me, pale and luminous in a halo of golden hair. Her eyes shine. *Beautiful*, I whisper, and it's true, but I do not desire her.

Perhaps a diversion. I slide my tongue between her legs, which after the initial shock she seems to like, and when after a while she shudders and cries out and her hand clenches in my hair, to my relief my flesh stirs. But my head pounds. I feel sick. I want to get this over with.

I climb up, and with an awkward push it is done. She is seen to. I could leave her now and no one could say we are not married in the eyes of God. But a wife has rights. And this lonely girl deserves better.

I move, and kiss her. She feels soft and hot inside. Perhaps it will be all right. I press harder. She gasps. Her hands slide on my back.

When you have her, you'll think of me.

She winces. I grit my teeth. I'm hurting her. I should end it. But I can't finish. I need him, and I can't.

I roll away from her, onto my back. I am sweating, breathing hard. I have never felt less like fucking in my life. And yet...

I hear her lick her lips. Her voice is timid. "Husband..."

"It isn't you." My throat parches. The strange taste of her lingers in my mouth. How I have humiliated her. "You are perfect. It is I who is... my lady, forgive me."

When I leave her, she's weeping.

BEFORE THE WEEK IS out, the tsar's summons arrives. We are at war.

I lose no time in preparing. For days, I have endured my lover's mercurial moods, my silent wife who stares at me and bites her lip, an unknowable expression in her eyes. Is it fear? Disgust?

Desire?

Christ, I wish she would not. I wish she would curse and spit at me. I had but one duty—to put a baby in her belly before I go—and at that I have failed, for I have not visited her bed again.

I can bear it no longer. I want out of this fresh hell, and the sooner the better.

Already, I have arranged everything. He will stay behind, of course. His talents lie in the counting house and the banquet hall, not on the battlefield, and this war will be bloody and without scruple. I have told him he will stay and take care of her. He hit me. I hit him back, and it ended as you might imagine—how golden that struggle, that victory—and he still has not forgiven me.

Already the two of them hate each other. But it is not for them to choose. Let them circle each other and snarl like fighting cats. I care not.

Today I am leaving. Alone in dawn's light, I dress, gather my things, buckle on my sword. In the yard, horses already champ and jingle.

My wife comes out to see me off. "Farewell, husband," she says formally. "Be safe."

I bow, and hand her my keys. "My steward will obey your commands. You are the mistress now. You may do as you please..." I catch her shoulder, put my lips to her ear. "*As you please,*" I underline in a whisper, "so long as you are discreet. I will ask no questions. But do not shame me, princess. This I cannot allow."

I mean it. This war will be lengthy. If she takes some man in secret to pass the time, so much the better. But over her shoulder, my gaze seeks out my lover's like a poisoned arrow, and he glowers back, dark and heated. He is a different story. He belongs to me.

Do not, my love. For you know it would break my heart.

My wife nods, breathless. "My lord, I would never—"

"You would never," I agree mildly. I believe her. She has heard the stories, after all. I place a chaste kiss on her cheek. "When I return, we will make a son. If it would please you."

I turn and go before I can see what she thinks of that.

THE THINGS I HAVE SEEN.

The stench of death tracks us across the steppe. The enemy have poisoned the wells, and our food runs dangerously low. The blood of battle has worked its way into my skin, and I cannot scrub my hands clean.

As a young man, I fought in skirmishes, earned my battle honours. But not like this. Never like this. Ten thousand killed in a single day, the cavalry charging over piles of dead and dying. Another week, another battle. Skinned faces, slashed viscera, puddles of blood in the dust. And still this enemy will not give up.

My days pass in a black fog. In the night, I weep. In the camp, wounded men call for their mothers and litter their prayers with curses. Their pleading drifts to me, beckoning, a fractured melody of pain. Like the stink of rotting wounds, it never fades. Out of mercy, I have ordered the ones who linger in agony to be butchered where they lie, but the sound will not cease.

I am living some darkly charmed existence. Arrows miss me by inches. Blows that ought to brain me glance off without harm. Some whisper that I am Satan's messenger, sent to bring hell on earth, for how else am I alive when so many better men have died? But I know it is not true. This horror we have wrought? It is not the devil's will. It is God's.

We fight on under burning sun. We eat the dogs and the dying horses. Dead men invade my dreams. Not faces, for by sheer weight of numbers I have forgotten those, but bodies. Bones crushed, guts rent like cloth, hot blood splashing up my arm. *Meat we are,* they whisper to me, *and meat you shall be.*

In my dream, I lie down in the mud beside them and rot. I kiss their cold lips, and the corpse opens its eyes and it is no nameless enemy but my lover, stiff and green, and when I wake I find I have polluted myself.

We march on my orders now. We have not laid eyes on the tsar's forces for weeks. The men are dying of the bloody flux. Some of them eat each other, or go mad. What are we fighting for? I find I have forgotten.

One night, as I lie awake, a dead weight descends, crushing my chest. It is a demon, a naked black shape crouching there with pointy elbows and red eyes burning. I know this demon well. We have met before, when I was a young man. Its claws sink into my chest. It whispers to me, and what it

whispers is terror. I groan and shudder, longing for the nightmares, for my cold dead lover's embrace. How he comforts me.

The next day, I paint my face with blood, and the heads of men I have killed hang from my saddle by the hair. I scream as I swing my axe. Perhaps this will keep the demon away.

At last, we reach the enemy's final stronghold. Another month of blood and thunder, and it is done. We spike their traitor king's head above the gate, drink his blood from a goblet at the feast while my demon sniggers in the corner and scratches his round black belly. The tsar showers me with honours, gifts, promises of land and treasure. He gulps sour ale and fucks the dead king's wives on the banquet table.

He reminds me of my father, this petty tyrant. I imagine twisting my blade in his guts—*see how you like dying over days in a mess of shit and maggots, you gore-loving halfwit*—but it gives me no pleasure. And that in itself is hope. A candle in the creeping black fog.

I am done with death. I want my castle, my hearth, my clever wife and the baby we will make. I want my warm and living lover, to drag me back from the ghastly edge of oblivion.

We gather our petty spoils, and the few who are left ride for home, the spectres of once decent men. The demon rides pillion with me, laughing, his claws digging into my back.

I turn in my saddle, but there is no one. I smile grimly, undeceived. I cannot see him, but I know he's there.

BY THE TIME I RETURN, winter has passed, and spring dusts the fields with green. Sunlight warms my face, a guilty bliss on my blackened heart. I long to see him, love him, prove I am not lost.

I have sent the men home, and alone I ride to my castle. Alone, that is, but for the demon, who has become my constant companion and soothes me at night when I cannot sleep. I shall make a place for him at my hearth. He deserves no less.

Night has fallen, the battlements warm and silent under the moon. The courtyard is still, the sound of hoof on stone echoing. I have sent no word of my arrival. After all I've seen and done, it is only now that am I afraid.

I am the same, yet like the dead at the day of judgement, I have been changed. What if my lover cannot bear to look at me?

The stable boys wake and hustle, exchanging alarmed looks. I hand them my horse—my loyal Blaze died long ago, along with the dogs, and this querulous beast has no name—and stride into the firelit hall.

Familiar scents swamp me, pine and roasting meat. They are feasting, and suddenly I am dizzy with relief. I've dreamed of carnage, of blood clotting on my floor and fly-blown corpses strung from my walls, and it sweetly beggars belief that there is still a place on this earth that is not a death-soaked hell.

On the dais, my wife is smiling. She is beautiful, her golden hair spilling free. At her side sits my lover. Just as I left him, warm and alive and everything that is fine in this world. It gladdens my heart, and I laugh aloud.

Row by row, the hall falls silent. She sees me, and jumps to her feet in alarm—and her gown spills over her swollen belly.

On my shoulder, the demon cackles, his claws drawing blood.

Bile crawls in my mouth like maggots. I leap onto the dais, my boots cracking the wood asunder, and it echoes the frigid rage that splits my heart.

"One thing, I asked of you." My voice thunders. "One small courtesy, that you do not spit on my honour in public. Yet this you could not do."

She shrinks from me, as well she might. "My lord—"

"*Be discreet*, I said. How did you imagine you could hide this? Do you think the world cannot count?" I don't wait for her answer. "Whose is it? By the devil, you will tell me or I will have your beating heart."

Her mouth hangs, but she has no words. Her gaze darts to him. He doesn't acknowledge her. He fixes his defiant charcoal stare on me.

And as if a knife is carving out my guts, I *know*.

My lover is brave. He does not run. He knows it is no use. He doesn't even flinch.

She has strong passions, my wife. I felt it, the way she moaned and clutched at me that night. And I know all too well his spite, his petty hunger for revenge. For I have fed it myself.

Since the day I departed, he has been fucking my wife. And everyone knows it.

I grab him by the throat and squeeze. His eyes goggle. My teeth grind so hard they crack. I can barely see for rage and tears. "I gave you everything! Why do you break my heart? "

He can't speak. He doesn't need to. His stare is a weapon. Like a spear through the fog, the glittering truth pierces me. And I bleed.

I gave him everything.

He's a second son, after all. He must make his own way. He never loved me. Never desired me. Since that moment in the forest village when he first caught my attention, he has lived a lie.

And so have I.

With a mighty wrench of muscle and bone, I break his neck.

He slumps to the dais, his fire extinguished. One more death. One more corpse. And I grab my pregnant wife by her golden hair, and drag her yelling towards the stairs.

She is tiny. I barely notice her struggles. In the chapel, my father's marble tomb taunts me as I haul her down the narrow steps. The crypt's rusted lock falls apart in my hand.

Inside, the low ceiling looms. Spiders crawl. Mould creeps. The biers are thick with grime. Here the bodies lie, just as I laid them out so many years ago. Ivar, Mikhail, Niklas. In places, flesh still clings to their bones, a strip of ragged cloth, the desiccated hair of the dead.

See what you have done. My father, pacing in the snow, blood still dripping from his fists, his blue-black hair spattered with gore. The sprawled bodies of my friends, bleeding from slashed throats. *You are my only son. See what you have made me do!*

Only I hadn't, not them. They were my friends and nothing more. He'd killed them on the strength of some servant's spiteful gossip. Because he couldn't bear even the idea that I might defy him, that I might find a single glimmer of light in the darkness.

I'd fought him, that day. Charged him in the snowy courtyard like a maddened bull. But I was young, and he'd thrashed me within an inch of my life, his contempt as crushing as his blows. I'd had to wait a long time to even the score.

My wife sees their remains, and wails like a banshee. In the corner, another skeleton hangs from the wall in wrist manacles. The last of my father's playthings. *Mercy,* they'd whisper, their voices ever weaker. *Mercy. Let it end.* People called him *witch*, but only because for what he truly was, we have no name.

The chains rattle as I kick away the bones. My wife's wrists are tiny. I have to twist the metal to make them fit. Her feet barely touch the ground. "See what you have done?" I whisper to her. "You are my wife, and see what you have made me do."

And I kiss her one last time, and walk away.

She screams, but I have slept through screams to frighten the devil. She begs, but my mercy bled out on the steppe and I have none left to give. The rusted hinges squeal as I pull the door shut. And then I hear her begging no more.

The hall is deserted, the fire dying to a hellish red glow. Before it, dogs snore and stretch, and my demon giggles and warms his curled toes.

I carry my lover to my chamber, and lay him gently on the bed where my father, too, had died. I'd crouched astride his chest and throttled him, while the fat black demon squatted on the bedpost and laughed. He'd kicked feebly, and spent his seed as strangled men do—there's irony, you hateful old fiend—and went to hell with a whimper. I'd held vigil for him, fascinated by the way his flesh turned colour, how his hair and fingernails fell out. Bruises on a corpse don't fade. They just rot faster.

I lie down beside my lover. Whisper to him. Stroke him, kiss his cold corpse lips. How his touch comforts me.

After some days—when he is beautiful no longer—I lay him out in the crypt beside the others. Now, I truly own him. Now, he is mine.

In the corner, my wife barely stirs. She, too, is no longer beautiful. I fix a fresh lock on the door.

The season passes into summer. The harvest is good, and the villagers still mutter and cross themselves when I ride by. My castle is silent and lonely. The servants creep and hide. I am growing old.

In August, I ride to the city and return with a new wife. Whispers of dark deeds trail in my wake, but the war has made me richer and more powerful, and I find there are fathers aplenty eager to trade their daughters to a nameless thing like me.

In my courtyard, I dismount and hand her from her cart. I watch her, as she looks around at my castle, my servants, my wealth and power. She is clever, my pretty bride. Already, she is planning how to deceive me.

I bow, and unhook my key ring from my belt. "Princess, you are the mistress here. You may do as you please—but for one thing." I hold up a tiny key. "This opens my crypt. It is private and holds many bad memories. I beg you, grant me this one small courtesy and do not enter there."

She curtseys. "My lord, I would not dare—"

"You would not dare," I agree, and smile at her. She has heard the stories, after all. "For you know it would break my heart."

Author's Note

The tale of Bluebeard is, I hope, familiar. Girl marries ugly but filthy rich prince. Girl opens the forbidden door; girl discovers the bloody corpses of all his previous wives, whom he murdered for (you guessed it) opening the forbidden door.

To which we can add, via translations of Charles Perrault, a mightily ridiculous *deus ex machina* ending: prince threatens to behead girl, but in a fit of righteousness takes his sweet time about it, whereupon girl is rescued by her pair of brothers—this is the first we've heard of them—who arrive unprompted and stab the wretch in his cold black heart.

Bluebeard is the villain from any 19th-century sensation novel: the Mysterious Heart-throb With A Spooky House out of every gothic 'romance' from *Jane Eyre* to *Crimson Peak*. The moral of the story is male control: break the rules, woman, and you'll get what you deserve. And the rules in this case are obedience, female fidelity and the missionary position. Like Desdemona's love for a man of colour, the lady's desire for this strange-looking prince is depicted as illicit, a sexual and moral kink for which she deserves punishment.

Because, as usual, we blame the woman. He is Satan, offering Eve the apple, but woe betide *her* if she eats.

But people in real life are not metaphors; they don't act merely to reinforce some moralistic refrain. Bluebeard is not a madman; we call such people 'monsters' because we don't want to admit they're as human as we are.

So (I wondered) what's really going on here?

Bluebeard's 'forbidden door' is clearly a trap: he baits the hook and waits, knowing she can't help but nibble. He never trusted her for a moment. So what's his agenda? Why marry her in the first place? Okay, so he murders his wives for discovering his secret—but why kill the first one? What started all this? *What else is he hiding behind that door?*

SINS OF THE SON is from Bluebeard's point of view, and it's my attempt at an answer to those questions. I'm making no excuses for murder, mind; if you're wondering why I didn't tell the victim's story instead, well, it's been done many times and by better heads than I. See, for example, *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter.

About the Author

Erica Hayes was a law student, an air force officer, an editorial assistant and a musician, before finally landing her dream job: fantasy and romance writer. She writes dark urban fantasy and paranormal romance, and her books feature tough, smart heroines and colourful heroes with shadowy secrets. She hails from Australia, where she drifts from city to city, leaving a trail of chaos behind her.

Read more at Erica Hayes's site.